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SUBJECT: SLOVENIA: FORMER PRESIDENT KUCAN LAMENTS LACK OF  
VISION IN CURRENT POLITICS

Classified By: COM Thomas B. Robertson for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Milan Kucan, independent Slovenia's first and longest serving president continues to hold his finger to the nation's political pulse. On February 1, he shared with COM his views on domestic politics and what he terms a lack of vision by both the ruling coalition and the opposition; developments in Kosovo and Serbia and potential negative implications for the region and beyond; relations with Croatia which he thinks are hostage to irrational posturing of politicians on both sides; and predictions on who Slovenia's next president will be: primping Pahor (head of Social Democrats), staid Peterle (Slovenia's first Prime Minister) or Slovenia's own new guru (current President) Janez D. End Summary.

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Slovenia - Blind Man's Bluff  
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12. (C) Former President Kucan, whose last declared political affiliation was with the Communist Party, nevertheless had good insights on the continuing implosion of what was once Slovenia's most powerful political party, Liberal Democracy (LDS). In short, he identified three things that have led it to its current disarray: arrogance, clientelism and political corruption. As he described it, during its years in power, LDS was like a light bulb in the night attracting moths. When it lost power, the attraction was lost as well. LDS was formed out of a coalition of parties which came together for the 1994 elections. Janez Drnovsek, an outsider, was drafted to be its leader. However, according to Kucan, the party under Drnovsek was a coalition of diverse members with Drnovsek as the glue that kept it together. When he stepped down as party president in 2002, LDS started losing its top membership. This was a process which accelerated after parliamentary losses in 2006 and continues today. Recent polls put LDS's popularity at just 10%. According to Kucan, LDS lacks vision and purpose. It does not know what it wants as a party, and it does not understand its role in the opposition - a result of too many years in power. Too many intellectuals with too much ego and self-interest populate the leadership. According to Kucan, if you want a strong political party, you'll have more success working with a less intellectual crowd. Kucan did not see Borut Pahor's Social Democrats (SD) as a viable alternative to LDS since it was cooperating with the current government on an a-la-carte basis and, Pahor was "all talk and no substance."

13. (C) While allowing that the current government led by

Janez Jansa (SDS) had done some good things, Kucan asserted that it, too, lacked vision. The issues it seems most focused on, health reform and education, for example, were not even issues in the election campaigns. It simply is not clear what the government's goals are for Slovenia. Kucan was particularly critical of the education policies of the administration, which he said, would result in the gutting of the public education system in favor of expensive private education, thus reducing Slovenia's overall competitiveness in one generation.

14. (C) Kucan continued that it was understandable that Slovenia seemed to be crashing around in the dark, because all the big issues that created unity across political divides were now gone: independence, NATO and EU membership, joining the Euro zone. Slovenia needs vision and in Kucan's view, neither Jansa nor anyone in the opposition is supplying it.

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Campaign 2007 - Slovenia's Next President  
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15. (C) A few well-known Slovene politicians have declared their intentions to run in the next presidential elections scheduled for Autumn 2007. When asked for his predictions, Kucan laughed and said it would probably be better if he left the country for a couple years (presumably to finally kill any hopes that he would run again). Of Alojz Peterle, a former Prime Minister and current member of the European Parliament, Kucan said he had credibility, but would have trouble with the left. At the time of independence, Kucan explained, many believed that to be pro-democracy and pro-independence, you had to be anti-Communist. Memories are long and the old communists would have trouble supporting Peterle. He thought the Social Democrat (SD) president and

also member of European Parliament, Borut Pahor, had a good chance. Kucan did not lose the opportunity to reiterate that he thought Pahor was more interested in his weight, diet and looks than serious political issues (Pahor is often accused of being politically shallow and personally narcissistic), but, that said, he has wide appeal and no real enemies. If Pahor ran, Peterle would have real difficulty winning.

16. (C) When asked about Drnovsek's recent hints that he might, after all, run again, Kucan said he could not be counted out. Kucan said Drnovsek was famously indecisive and had chosen to run for the Presidency the last time only at the eleventh hour. He added that all of Drnovsek's recent "changes" (referring to the more spiritual persona Drnovsek is projecting lately), haven't really changed Drnovsek at his core. He wouldn't be surprised if he did run again. And, if he did, it would be difficult to predict who might win. Kucan said he would not mind seeing a woman in the mix, mentioning specifically Spomenka Hribar one of Slovenia's original freedom fighters and former LDS politician, but there was no evidence she was even remotely interested.

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Croatia Border Disputes - All Should Agree to Disagree and Move On  
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17. (C) Relations with its neighbors is always well covered in the Slovenian press, and Kucan had a healthy dose of criticism for the way these have been handled so publicly by this government. Commenting on relations with Croatia, Kucan said there was "lots of irrationality on both sides." He said he would try to explain the situation objectively, but he couldn't help but offer the view that Croatia is "more irrational." His understanding of the Croatian "superiority complex" is that it is rooted in Croatia's history as an independent nation (which Slovenia never was until 1991), it's self definition as a Roman Catholic bastion against Islam and (Serbian) Orthodoxy, and the fact that it was a force to be reckoned with (as Slovenia was not) during the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This background, plus

lingering resentment over weapons sales (by Slovenia) during the Balkan wars, combine to make it impossible for Croatia to appear to be granting any sort of concession to Slovenia. As Kucan said, land and sea border issues have been exploited politically so thoroughly on both sides that the only solution is probably for all politicians in Slovenia and Croatia to agree to "freeze" the conflict and come to some accommodation through a joint fishing regime.

18. (C) Kucan lamented the many lost opportunities to resolve the issue both between former Slovenian PM Drnovsek and former Croatian PM Racan, as well as his own agreements with former Croatian President Franjo Tudjman. He blamed lawyers and intellectuals in Zagreb for shrill rejection based on nationalist prejudices and overly strict interpretations of the law. Kucan dismissed the notion that once Croatia was in the EU, this problem would fade. He thought this a naive hope and that it was a mistake by the EU to persist in ignoring the ongoing dispute.

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Kosovo - Trepidation  
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19. (C) When asked about Kosovo, Kucan replied that "he didn't know what to say." He was worried no matter what the decision would be, not just because of the impact it may have on security in the region. But he was also concerned by how it might be used as justification for Albanians in Macedonia, and separatists in other places such as Catalonia, Nagorno Karabakh, etc. Kucan thought that the international community had too easily yielded to assertions that Albanians and Serbians could not live together. He felt that after 1999, no one was willing to push them to try again, and he wondered how the two would be able to live together, one day, when both were members of the EU.

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Comment  
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10.(C) Milan Kucan demonstrated why he is so well beloved by the people of Slovenia. He is open, approachable and seemingly sincere in his discourse. This does not mean he is unaware of the impact his comments to the U.S. Ambassador have, however, he also did not seem to be simply "telling us

what we want to hear." Through his Forum 21 and continued speculation that he might form or at least support a new left-leaning political party, Kucan retains significant political influence, though he has been out of public office for nearly five years. Kucan maintains strong ties to the left and will continue to provide perceptive insights into Slovenian politics for the foreseeable future.

ROBERTSON